

Literacy on the Edge: How Close Are We to Closing the Literacy Achievement Gap?

Rarely does a day go by without some mention of the literacy achievement gap catching my attention. I may read about it on the numerous professional listservs to which I subscribe, hear students in my college classes discuss its impact on their students' lives, or write about it, as I am doing here. Whatever the circumstance, the question that frequently emerges for me is this: How close are we to closing an academic gap that has plagued schools in the United States for much too long?

Not surprisingly, answers vary depending on the ages at which students are assessed and the outcome measures used. Although literacy implies more than reading, quite often it is reading (and not writing) that is the focus of attention. Suffice it to say, however, that nationally the picture is not rosy where reading and the middle years are concerned. For example, at grade eight, the average score gaps on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading in 2003 between White and Black students and between White and Hispanic students were not found to differ significantly from those in 2002 or 1992 (Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, 2003).¹ A decade and no significant change!

But the message I hope to convey here is not one of gloom and doom. Rather, my goal is to provide an overview of what those of us interested in

the middle years can do at this critical point in time to ensure that what seems like a case of "literacy on the edge" for some of our nation's ill-served students becomes, instead, a launching pad for closing the gap between their achievement and that of their better-served peers. After a brief explanation of what I believe contributes in large part to the intransigence of the literacy achievement gap in the middle years—and an equally brief discussion of the ramifications of ignoring that gap—I concentrate on what I believe are the two most basic guidelines for addressing the problem. Although giving serious thought to implementing these guidelines may not afford a direct answer to the question, "How close are we to closing the literacy achievement gap?" such consideration should, at the very least, provide some indication of the scope of work needing to be done.

Persistent Problem

Undoubtedly, increasing attention is being paid to the literacy achievement gap in the early grades at national, state, and local levels, yet it remains a significant problem there as well as in the middle grades and beyond. As students with a history of reading difficulties move up through the grades, they present more and harder challenges to their teachers. For example, because they read so infrequently, they typically will not have acquired the requisite background knowledge, skills, and specialized vocabulary needed for comprehending the texts they are assigned as part of the regular school curriculum. Teachers understandably become frustrated when this occurs and sometimes resort to what Finn (1999) calls a "domesticating" education. That is, they expect less of these students in exchange for the students' good will and reason-

¹ Results of the NAEP 2005 assessment in reading will be released in the fall of 2005.

able effort in completing class assignments that typically require little, if any, reading. Lowered expectations, however, only exacerbate the problem.

Another worrisome part of the problem is a condition known as *aliteracy*, which means having the capacity to read but electing not to do so. Aliteracy presents a different set of challenges to teachers of students in the middle grades—challenges having to do primarily with low self-efficacy and motivation for reading, at least when the reading is school related. Why might this be the case?

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to perform a certain task (e.g., read a book, design a Web page, write a poem), makes a significant difference in how competent one feels in approaching that task. In fact, there is substantial research to suggest that motivation to complete certain literacy tasks is heightened (or lowered) by the perceptions we have about our own competencies in relation to those tasks (Alexander, 2005). All of us experience different degrees of self-efficacy, no matter what our age or reading "level." Yet most of us, if we enjoy reading and believe that we have the ability to overcome temporary snags in understanding, will engage with texts that are sometimes too difficult if we feel the benefits are worth our effort.

The research is less clear, however, on the shifts that occur in students' motivation to read over time, especially when they have experienced years of struggling to read school-assigned texts. Although decreases in intrinsic reading motivation have been noted as children move from elementary school to the middle grades, explanations vary as to the cause. For example, in an extensive review of how instruction influences students' reading engagement and academic performance, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded that instructional approaches such as direct instruction, scaffolding, and guided reading, while important, do not directly impact student outcomes (e.g., time spent reading independently, achievement on standardized tests, performance assessments, and be-

liefs about reading). Instead, the level of student engagement is the mediating factor, or avenue, through which classroom instruction influences reading outcomes. What this means is that teachers must take into account the degree to which students engage (or disengage) over time in a reading-related task.

Ignoring the Gap Is Not a Solution

Given the complexity and persistence of the problem, ignoring the literacy achievement gap is not an option. As Ronald Ferguson (2004) reminds us in his foreword to *Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap, Grades 4–12*, failure to raise minority students' reading achievement on a national scale will have increasingly serious consequences. Writing from his perspective as an economist at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Ferguson minced no words in his assessment of the situation:

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A key fact is that a few decades from now, there will be no racial or ethnic majority group in the United States. So along with African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians, Americans of European ancestry will be a minority. Collectively, non-Whites will constitute the majority in both the electorate and the workforce. It is no exaggeration to say that failure to raise achievement among Black and Brown children may weaken the economic, political, and social stability of the nation. As never before, closing the achievement gap is in everyone's interest, and the nation's leaders know it. (p. vii)

Ferguson's statement brings to mind the critical need to consider other factors associated with the literacy achievement gap, namely, socioeconomic conditions such as parents' occupational status, educational attainment, and income. And

In effect, re/mediation is about changing the ecology of classroom teaching and learning.

while such factors are known to have an impact on all students' reading achievement (e.g., see RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004), they typically have not figured prominently into most of the education research conducted to date. This may change, however, as policies stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 progressively make their weight felt in the middle grades arena. Provisions in the NCLB legislation that require all schools serving low-income students to demonstrate annual yearly progress also call for strict accountability measures. It is likely, therefore, that education researchers in the future will attend more closely to socioeconomic factors associated with the literacy achievement gap, and particularly to the diversity of students' needs and the complexity of the tasks that teachers face in meeting those needs.

Two Basic Guidelines

How those of us committed to improving students' ability and motivation to read in the middle grades approach our responsibilities will vary, of course. And that is as it should be. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this article, I would like to focus on a view that calls for rethinking how we teach students whose motivations to read (or not to read) hinge on a variety of factors, including cognitive, social, and cultural. Specifically, it involves rethinking ways to reach out to struggling or reluctant readers along lines hinted at by Cole and Griffin's (1986) research two decades ago, and more recently picked up in the work of Luke and Elkins (2000) on re/mediating adolescent literacies. This perspective also calls for rethinking our definition of text, broadening it to include print, visual, digital, and various other modalities suggested by the New London Group's (2000) multiliteracies framework. In sum, this view calls for transitioning to teaching in "newer" times and for modifying our notions of what counts as text. Their guide-

lines endorse but one approach to addressing the literacy achievement gap in the middle grades.

Transitioning to Teaching in "Newer" Times

Re/mediation, a new metaphor for thinking about different ways that teachers might intervene in their students' reading lives, offers potentially useful insights into the struggles experienced by students caught in the literacy achievement gap. It calls for moving beyond fruitless searches for some method (or magic bullet, if you will) that promises to fix students' so-called deficits in reading, a goal traditionally associated with the work of reading specialists and most of the remedial reading interventions that are on the market today.

Re/mediating, in the sense that Luke and Elkins (2000) use the term, equates to creating instructional conditions that will enable all teachers, not just reading specialists, "to come to grips with the contextual variables in adolescent lives, all of the complex causes and consequences of any given action and intervention, and the multiple relations between media technologies that adolescents juggle every day" (p. 397). In a metaphoric sense, then, re/mediation involves fixing the conditions in which students learn rather than attempting to fix the students per se (remediation without the slash).

Modifying Our Notions of What Counts as Text

In fashioning their new metaphor, re/mediation, as an alternative to the more familiar notion of remediation, Luke and Elkins (2000) drew on some interesting derivatives for the terms *medium*, *media*, and *mediate*. They observed, for instance, that all three of these concepts spoke to ways of communicating, framing, and scaffolding ideas within both traditional and more broadly defined textual environments. In effect, re/mediation is about changing the ecology of classroom teaching and learning by taking into account a broadened view of text and the multiliteracies made possible by today's new information communica-

tion technologies. The multiple texts such technologies support are multimodal (visual, aural, digital, spatial) and readily available to many reluctant or struggling readers who find themselves bored and/or incapable of engaging with school-assigned (primarily print) texts.

The extent to which the new information communication technologies effectively support literacy teaching and learning in English language arts classrooms is unknown. There is little empirical research on the topic generally, and even less that applies specifically to instruction in the middle grades (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). A related issue is the paucity of available research sites given that so few schools have integrated the new technologies into their curricula (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004), although this is changing, as evidenced, for example, by the state of Maryland's recent decision to incorporate comic book reading as part of its official curriculum (Mui, 2004).

Several pilot programs in Maryland have been designed to engage reluctant readers in a form of reading materials believed to be highly motivational and curriculum-worthy. Not surprisingly, this innovative approach to teaching reluctant readers has garnered considerable media coverage. In turn, high-ranking school officials have been quick to point out that the use of comics for instructional purposes is not meant to replace the traditional curriculum but rather to serve as a supplement to it. The Maryland programs feature a range of comic book topics thought to interest young people as well as provide important background knowledge for school-related reading. For example, fifth graders in a school in Harford County, northeast of Baltimore, read a comic book that featured Donald Duck as well as one that followed the lives of women in science.

In responding to the media attention that Maryland's comic book project has generated, Susan Ohanian (n.d.) adroitly noted in her Web-based column titled *Atrocities*:

Novelty is definitely in the eye of the beholder. Some of us have advocated encouraging children to read

anything and everything for decades. It just baffles me that people *wouldn't* be delighted for kids to read comics. Or that educators would not be aware of the existing research on this topic. The National Council of Teachers of English, for one, has published articles on using comic books in the classroom.

Later, in the same posting, Ohanian went on to note that indeed the Maryland initiative is unique in that it is the first statewide program of its kind in the United States. Not being particularly enamored, however, of the potential for "basalizing" Donald Duck, she cautioned her readership, "If you can stand it, read further: there are all sorts of lessons on the comic book genre. And of course the ubiquitous vocabulary lesson raises its ugly head." With all due respect for Ohanian's concern that a genre particularly pleasing to reluctant readers is in jeopardy of being co-opted by the very system that seeks to motivate these kids, I still have to wonder if simply ignoring an opportunity to test out the feasibility of turning to comics would be just as costly, if not more so.

In the May 3, 2005, book section of *USA Today* (read online), Greg Topo's piece entitled "Teachers Are Getting Graphic" suggests that teachers are just now discovering what librarians have known all along, namely, that comics are teaching kids—especially boys—to read and getting them excited about literature. Topo quoted Austin librarian and author Michele Gorman as saying, "Reading is an acquired skill. . . . If you have negative experiences early on with reading, you just quit."

The desire to turn reluctant readers on to subject matter learning by building vital background knowledge through reading comics is yet another foray into a genre that only half a century ago was deemed "trash literature" (Wertham, 1953). Today, however, there is evidence of a small but growing movement to rehabilitate the image of comics

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as “serious” reading material. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated in Topo’s (2005) interview with Michael Bitz, a Columbia University professor, who is the founding director of the Comic Book Project. This project, which originated in 2001 in Queens, New York, is a 10-city after-school program that provides youth in the middle grades and below with opportunities to publish comic books that they have written. To date, over 30,000 students have published on topics as diverse as AIDS, Superman, and the plight of Tibet.

Lest one think that comic books are being inappropriately romanticized in the context of an article on closing the literacy achievement gap, it is important to consider the following segment from a transcribed interview with Michael Bitz by *Voice of America* on January 7, 2005. Asked to comment on teachers’ anecdotal evidence that students in his Comic Book Project were improving their reading and writing skills by refining and editing original work that they cared deeply about and that kept them engaged for long periods of time, Bitz replied: “As much as people like to kind of quote ‘the Mozart effect’—which is [that] if you send a kid to a symphony concert, all of a sudden he becomes a better math student—it just doesn’t work that way.”

Like Bitz, Carol Jago, who teaches English in a school near Los Angeles, values the motivational appeal of comics and graphic novels but stops short of recommending that they substitute for what she calls “hard texts.” In her words,

I worry tremendously that if we bring stuff like this into the schools for low-level students, but everybody else reads regular texts, aren’t we creating a two-level system? If we’re giving students a comic book version of their English class [book], something’s wrong. . . . And that is a danger. Nobody is going to bring comic books into an Advanced Placement class. (Jago quoted in Topo, 2005).

Coming Full Circle to the Problem

A key assumption of a re/mediated view of literacy teaching and learning is that literacy is always connected to social purposes. It is first and foremost concerned with getting things done in the real world (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Literacies are not confined to basic reading skills, such as comprehending school-assigned texts, but instead are ways of interacting with texts of various kinds in various situations for various purposes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). All of which is to say that a re/mediated view of literacy teaching and learning seems well suited to addressing the persistent problem of a literacy achievement gap that I would argue is tied, at least in part, to struggling readers’ insufficient background knowledge for comprehending school-assigned texts, aliteracy, and low self-efficacy and motivation for reading in general.

Because many struggling or reluctant readers find their own reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading to acquire school knowledge of academically sanctioned texts—it is important to offer them a variety of reading materials. This is not to say that academic literacy is unimportant; rather, it is to emphasize the need to consider young people’s multiple literacies and their implications for classroom instruction.

Finally, we know from the research on exemplary literacy instruction in the middle grades that embedding materials that tap into students’ multiple literacies in the regular curriculum can sometimes turn students around in terms of their perceptions of self-efficacy and motivation to read (Alvermann, 2002). Also, as Lankshear & Knobel (2003) have repeatedly stressed, it is important to include in the regular curriculum multiple forms of text (print, visual, aural, and digital) so that students have opportunities to read critically for multiple purposes in a variety of materials. For this to become a reality, it will require the support of administrators and policy makers who buy into the idea that all students, including those who struggle to read in subject-area classrooms, deserve

instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs.

A Parting Thought

Teaching with an eye to re/mediation requires letting go of (or at the very least rethinking) some old “truths” about what counts as text. Despite (and perhaps largely because of) the texts I have held up for examination in this article, I am left with the nagging suspicion that as educators we are not fully comfortable with the multiple literacies (e.g., print, visual, digital, and spatial) that students in the middle grades have at their disposal and use regularly outside of school. Is our focus on print-based literacy (and here, paper copies of comics fall well within view) too short-sighted? Might an over-reliance on print be limiting the options available for developing a wider range of literacies in youth who struggle to read their school-assigned texts? What might teachers and researchers working from a re/mediation perspective learn about conditions that support instruction with a broader view of reading than the current one?

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2005 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2005 elections, **Kathleen Blake Yancey**, Clemson University, South Carolina, was chosen vice president. Yancey will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November. In other elections, **Susan Houser-Murphy**, Pinellas County Schools, Florida, was elected to a two-year term as Middle Level Representative-at-Large.

Middle Level Section members also elected new officers. Elected to four-year terms on the Steering Committee were **Anderson T. Graves II**, Capitol Heights Junior High School, Montgomery, Alabama, and **Sandy Hayes**, Becker Middle School, Becker, Minnesota. Elected to the 2005–2006 Nominating Committee were **Heidi Huckabee**, Mesa Middle School, Roswell, New Mexico, chair; **Mark A. Lewis**, Bogle Junior High School, Chandler, Arizona; and **Karen D. Sails**, Indianapolis Public Schools, Indiana.

On the NCTE Web site, see the "Election News" area for additional election results and the "Nominations" area for details on submitting nominations for the 2006 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/about/gov/elec>).